

Blended Family Stages Developmental Tasks
From “Strengthening Your Stepfamily”
By Einstein and Albert

1. Fantasy

- Decide where to live
- Discuss money and discipline issues
- Plan a marriage ceremony that includes children in a meaningful way
- Begin to recognize and resolve leftover grief
- Help children deal with fears and let go of fantasies about parents reuniting
- Learn as much realistic and practical information about blended family living
- Agree about whether to have an “ours” baby
- Complete as many tasks as possible in this stage during courtship

2. Confusion

- Begin to resolve decisions that you failed to negotiate during courtship
- Let go of the notion that your blended family can make up for the past
- Say final good-byes so new beginnings can happen
- Avoid taking all stepchildren’s misbehavior personally
- Decide how to relate constructively to ex-spouse
- Define and begin establishing step parents role
- Work to create a system of shared discipline
- Learn to share children and accept that they live between two homes
- Explore any uncomfortable feelings about sexual attraction among family members
- Clarify relationships with school
- Discuss feelings, especially fears

3. Crazy Time

- Examine needs and expectations of family members to see which aren’t being met
- Restructure and clarify boundaries between the two families
- Be honest about problems that exist, don’t deny them
- Reduce power struggles and competition
- Consider custody shifts if they seem in the child’s best interest
- Recognize crisis as a need for change. Confront it and stick through it
- Recognize which issues are not specifically blended family issues (abuse, alcoholism, adolescence, etc)
- Identify destructive blended family interactions (games)

4. Stability

- build a sense of family – “we” “ours”
- Become aware of the roles that have finally emerged
- Connect with family members in a meaningful way
- Share memories; build traditions and goals
- Continue to plan family activities and enrich the couple relationship

5. Commitment

- Accept that commitment means a choice to succeed
- Recognize that the blended family has begun to feel solid and reliable
- Be aware of traditions and rituals that have become ingrained
- Take full responsibility for choices
- Let go of blended family games

- Accept change as a non-threatening reality
- Accept ambivalence, sadness and joy, closeness and distance coexist
- Restore and renew difficult relationships
- Begin to reap the rewards that your blended family has worked for!

Blended Family Stages Descriptions

Stage 1 = Fantasy – The Grand Illusion

In this stage the family/couple are caught up in many fantasies concerning both the marriage and the family. Some common thoughts and dreams during this time are; 1) This new marriage will return me to “square one”, where I used to be before my previous marriage/relationship. 2) I’ve finally found the “right mate” so this time I’ll get it right. 3) The new step parent can rescue the kids from the inadequacies or excesses of the absent biological parent. 4) children often fantasize that their biological parents will magically get back together. 5) There will be instant love between all blended family members. 6) This will be easier than before. 7) The general public will see and understand how great our new family is.

As the family begins to realize how much work is involved in a blended family and honest feelings come out about each other, the family begins to move into the next stage, confusion.

Stage 2 = Confusion – What are we doing in a Blended Family?????

During this stage everyone starts to sense that something is wrong, but no one really knows what it is. Suppressed feelings start to emerge. Fear of failure makes the parents anxious. Unclear roles cause confusion. Children begin to show indifference or hostility. As the discipline dilemma deepens, tension rises. Sex between the parents may still satisfy, but it will usually become less and less frequent. As the adults are confronted with the courtship tasks that weren’t completed, they begin to doubt the decisions they have made. Children sense the tension and begin to fear that maybe this family won’t work either. To protect themselves from more loss, they either withdraw or stop building trust in the new stepparent. Boundary issues begin to flare. . . children become more and more confused and worried about the definition of the family. Conflicting needs and expectations emerge, but most are left unexamined. As the differences emerge, family members are usually quiet during the initial stages and then gradually as the tension builds, the painful feelings begin to manifest and more and more often negative feelings are displayed and that moves the family into the next stage, which is crazy time.

Stage 3 = Crazy Time – The Pain and Disappointment of Crisis

At this stage, the highly charged issues find the blended families two groups on different teams. Suddenly everything seems to be out in the open, yet nothing gets resolved. Struggles between the marriage partners, combined with those of the two families snowball into one large battle. The blended family has reached the point of CRISIS. In Greek crisis means **decision or turning point** and the final result of the crisis is a decision to either stay together or separate. Crisis forces the family to begin to resolve differences. For if they don't the blended family will not survive. The process starts with renegotiating, rebuilding and creating a new set of rules for the blended family to live by. The OLD RULES WILL NOT WORK in the new setting. Attempts to push the old rules on the family will further delay the task completion at this stage. Many families get stuck here in trying to be right and do it the old way. As movement through this stage begins, the family will begin to define new roles, rules, communication processes and decision making procedures. As the blended family moves through this very difficult stage trust can begin to take root and grow. Adolescent challenges are amplified in this stage and intensified. Most blended families tend to overlook the fact that teens in the family are in many turning points in their own individual development. When a teen's individual development is out of sync with the family's development everyone is affected and crisis often erupts. Shifting custody and loyalty conflicts often manifest during this stage. The chaos and turmoil that occur during this stage can push the family toward resolution and the next stage. . . stability

Stage 4 = Stability – Coming Together

As the blended family begins to stabilize, the key attitude is mutuality, building a sense of "us" or "we" or "our family". Responsibility for making family work well together is now shared by all, the family begins to look and act like a team. Acceptance of each other and tolerance of differences is much more prominent during this stage. The family moves toward being close rather than being right. The family will still experience problems, but the reaction will be different. The family tends to pull together and cooperate rather than being chaotic and fragmented as in previous stages. Feelings and thoughts are freely shared during this phase and respect is much more present. As the family continues to fine tune and become more and more efficient at being together, they begin to move into the final stage, commitment.

Stage 5 = Commitment – Choosing to Connect

This welcome calm allows for insight, a time for reflection. Commitment means choice and that usually entails the choice to be very committed to the idea of the family as a unit, long term, working to be largely unaffected by the conflicts within and outside the family. Commitment becomes a way to show love, it is a decision to stick together, the choice that it is worth it and that energy and loyalty now flow to the family. In this stage the family members accept the rhythm of change and the concept of balance both between the marriage partners and the family members. Denial becomes a thing of the past, because the family realizes that it is from the courage confronting difficulties that strength and closeness produce lasting loyalty and closeness.